

Ferdinand Mueller in the Jungles and 'Australian Switzerland' of East Gippsland

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The vegetation of East Gippsland has a long reputation for attracting botanical interest. Impressive even to non-botanically-trained eyes are sheltered patches of cool and warm temperate rainforest, and striking plants such as the Gippsland Waratah, *Telopea oreades* F. Muell., and the blotchy mintbush, *Prostanthera walteri* F. Muell. Before the conversion of many rich river flat rainforests into pasture, and long before the investigations of Norman Wakefield, David Ashton and David Cameron, another botanist was also fascinated by the diversity and richness of the vegetation of East Gippsland.

Almost 140 years ago Victoria's first government botanist, Dr Ferdinand (later Baron von) Mueller, sought a particular patch of near-coastal warm temperate rainforest - vine-smothered 'jungle' which nurtured the colony's only indigenous palm. Later he ventured even further east - into areas which he called 'Australian Switzerland'. He was delighted with his botanical findings in both the 'jungles' and 'Australian Switzerland' of East Gippsland.

This paper describes Mueller's mid-nineteenth century botanical exploration of the largely trackless and little-known part of the colony east of the Snowy River. Decades later, as new tracks were being cut through the district of Croajingolong, Mueller proposed that FNCV members should visit the region, and argued for the formation of vegetation reserves in East Gippsland.

Ferdinand Mueller

Dr Ferdinand Mueller was appointed to the new position of Government Botanist for the young colony of Victoria in January 1853, and spent his first three

summers on extensive field trips surveying the flora of the colony. Since explorers and botanists, including Mueller himself, had already collected and documented some of the plants of lowland southern and eastern Australia, Mueller was most anxious to investigate the unknown flora of Victoria's alps - a flora which could provide new plants for European horticulture. However, he included lowland parts of Gippsland in each of these three epic expeditions (Barnard 1904; Gillbank 1992a).

East Gippsland was of particular interest to a botanist in search of the eastern limits of Victorian plants and the southern limits of sub-tropical plants. In his second and third trips Mueller crossed the lower Snowy and Brodribb rivers to reach Cabbage-tree Creek, where he marvelled at the tropical appearance of jungle which included the Cabbage Tree Palm, *Livistona australis* (R. Br.) Martius, and many vines and other plants which botanists, such as Robert Brown and Allan Cunningham, had already found much further north along the eastern coast of Australia. A few years later Mueller managed to reach the eastern tip of the colony and documented the flora of the Genoa valley and its environs - parts of which he later described as 'Australian Switzerland'.

First field trip, 1853

Mueller's first field expedition began late in January 1853, within days of his appointment as Government Botanist. The five month trip covering over 2,000 kilometres targeted the alps but included parts of South Gippsland (Gillbank 1991). In May 1853 Mueller stayed at Alberton. At the southern end of the Tambo Valley track to Omeo and the Monaro Tableland, Alberton was the gate-way to Gippsland. From there he sailed across to Wilson's Promontory, whose flora he was keen to

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compare with that of Tasmania. Pleased with his botanical findings, he was aware that botanical riches awaited discovery in other parts of Gippsland. As he explained to the Chief Secretary,

I feel perfectly convinced, that the more distant localities in the East and North of Gipps land must be considered as the richest and most deserving country for a full phytological exploration (Mueller to Lonsdale, 19 May 1853).

The fruits of Mueller's second and third expeditions vindicated his botanical expectations.

Second Field Trip, 1853/54

During his second expedition, Mueller managed to reach both North and East Gippsland. In the summer of 1853/54 bushfires prevented his reaching the heart of Victoria's alps. Disappointed, he climbed the Cobberas mountains and then continued in a north-easterly direction to where he thought the Snowy River crossed the unsurveyed NSW border. He followed the main Monaro-Omeo track from south of the Cobberas across the ranges to the junction of the Pinch and Snowy rivers and perhaps a further few miles up the Snowy Valley (Wakefield 1952). By the Snowy river Mueller (1854) noticed the Kurrajong, *Brachychiton populneus* R. Br.,

a beautiful tree from the tropics, growing with its turgid stem out of the bare granite rocks, washed by the tremendous floods of the melting snow. With many of its usual companions, it reaches here its most southerly limits.

Mueller's collections from this part of the Snowy Valley were all from well within what is now known to be New South Wales and included several species which were not authentically recorded for Victoria for nearly a century (Wakefield 1952). Mueller was quite generous (some may say cavalier) in determining which plants could be considered Victorian. Plants found within about a day's walk outside the colony's border were accepted as Victorian and included in his 'Key to the System of Victorian Plants'

(Williamson 1919). Since, in the 1850s, the exact position of the eastern end of the NSW-Victorian border was still unknown, it could be said that Mueller was being thorough, as well as generous, in including plants from the Snowy Mountains in the flora of Victoria.

Since Mueller's reports and letters were primarily vehicles for botanical information, it is unfortunate but not surprising that they include only rare mention of the people who provided information, company and shelter, and only sparse details of the routes he followed. Mueller did report that, during his quest for the Cabbage Tree Palms in the summer of 1853/54, he was unable to follow the Snowy River southwards from where he thought it crossed the NSW border. Instead he had to backtrack to Omeo to follow the main Monaro-Gippsland track down the Tambo valley and then trek eastwards across the lower Snowy River towards Cabbage-tree Creek (Mueller to Foster, 10 March 1854).

His published reports do not reveal his source of information about those palms. However, in a letter written decades later, Mueller acknowledged some pastoral help. He mentioned that the McLeods knew of the unusual patch of palms near the lower Brodribb River, which then formed the eastern boundary of John McLeod's Orbost run. The Newmerella or Lochend run on the other (western) side of the Snowy River was leased by John's older brother, Norman (Wakefield 1969a). Mueller explained that, while searching for pasture, Norman McLeod and two other squatters had stumbled across the patch of palms, which, since it was not pasture vegetation, held little interest for them (Mueller to Barnard, 19 February 1889).

In March 1854, several years after the pastoralists' discovery of the palms, Mueller reached McLeod's deserted Orbost run and the already-named Cabbage-tree Creek, where he found the Cabbage Tree Palms, whose genus he sometimes called *Corypha* and

sometimes *Livistona*. He quickly informed the Chief Secretary that:

Here occurs between the Broadribb [sic] and Snowy-river sparingly and on a rather circumscribed locality on the Cabbage-tree river the stately *Corypha australis*, the only Palmtree of the province (Mueller to Foster, 10 March 1854).

In this letter, and in his Annual Report Mueller wrote glowingly of this beautiful fan palm.

The stately *Corypha* palm or *Livistonia* [sic] *australis*, one of the 'princes of the vegetable world,' attains here the height of more than sixty feet, and may be deemed one of the most useful productions of our Flora, furnishing in its young leafstalks and terminal bud the palm cabbage, a food equally wholesome and delicious, whilst the fan-shaped leaves are eagerly collected for the manufacture of hats (Mueller 1854).

Mueller was pleased and proud to be able to locate and identify Victoria's only palm and to make its presence known to the government and public.

Mueller was amazed that, at a latitude similar to that of Melbourne, the vegetation appeared so tropical.

Many of the plants which the late Allan Cunningham collected in Illawarra and made that locality his favourite place, I was also fortunate enough to observe here towards the mouth of the Snowy river and along the Broadribb [sic] and Cabbage-tree river, where almost suddenly the vegetation assumes a tropical character with all its shady groves of dark and broadleaved trees of horizontal foliage, with all those impenetrable and intricate masses of climbers over running the highest trees, and with so many peculiar forms of the vegetable Kingdom never transgressing the tropical zone unless under the favourable influence of the humid mild atmosphere of the coast (Mueller to Foster, 10 March 1854).

Mueller was thrilled with the variety of 'tropical' plants growing in East Gippsland. Unfortunately however, it was

late in the season and many plants were already in fruit. To observe their flowers, Mueller realized that he would have to revisit East Gippsland earlier in the season.

Perhaps many other connections with the Flora of the Morton-bay district will be once pointed out, as I could in this cursory visit not exhaust the botanical richness of the place; for the impossibility of recrossing the Snowy River without canoes in rainy weather and the want of protection against the hostilities of the aborigines since the Squatting-stations here are deserted, induced me to an earlier return, as I originally desired (Mueller to Foster, 10 March 1854).

He forwarded his botanical specimens to Governor La Trobe via the Police Magistrate at Alberton, who, on Mueller's previous expedition, had helped him reach Wilson's Promontory (Mueller to La Trobe, 14 March 1854). Excited but only partly satisfied with his botanical observations, Mueller returned to the Botanic Gardens in Melbourne to complete his over 3,000 kilometre trek.
Third field trip, 1854/55

On his third epic botanical expedition Mueller succeeded in reaching the alps of Victoria and New South Wales, from where he again sought to visit the fabulous palm jungles of East Gippsland. This time he travelled south along the track to the west of the Snowy River, through Wulgulmerang, Murrindal and Buchan pastoral runs, to the lower Snowy River (Wakefield 1969b). Late in January 1855 he sought the flowers of plants which he had observed already in fruit during his previous visit.

I collected in the Cabbage-tree country *Cissus Australasica* beautifully in flower; but I was again too late for *Celastrus Australis*, *Cocculus Harveyanus*, and others, which are yet required in an early state of development (Mueller 1855b).

Mueller (1855d) travelled as far east along the East Gippsland coast as the boggy nature of the country permitted and realized that, for an investigation of the

vegetation further to the east, he would have to approach it from the other direction - from the south-eastern corner of New South Wales. In the autumn of 1855 he returned to Melbourne via pastoral runs by Lakes King and Wellington.

Taxonomic tinkering

The difficulty of correctly naming plants so far from other botanical authorities and from the herbarium specimens which had been used in their naming (now called type specimens) is illustrated by the eight plant names which Mueller (1854) listed in his Annual Report as examples of tropical climbing plants -

Cissus Australasica, *Cocculus Harveyanus*, *Celastrus Australis*, *Morinda jasminoides*, *Tylophora barbata*, *Marsdenia rostrata*, *Smilax spinescens*, *Eustrephus latifolius*

In his first trip to East Gippsland in March 1854, Mueller was seeing each of these plants for the first time. Five of the climbers had already been named. Accompanying Matthew Flinders on his circumnavigation of Australia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Robert Brown had collected and later (1810) named *Tylophora barbata*, *Marsdenia rostrata*, *Smilax australis*, and *Eustrephus latifolius*; while *Morinda jasminoides* was Allan Cunningham's name which William Hooker published in 1834 (Ross 1993). Mueller was aware of and correctly used all but one of these names - *Smilax spinescens* instead of *S. australis*. Subsequently Mueller (1888) used Brown's name for native sarsaparilla.

The three other climbers' names were Mueller's. In a paper presented to Victoria's Philosophical Society late in 1854, Mueller (1855a) had officially described and named *Cissus Australasica* and *Celastrus Australis*. His name for the native grape which he found on the banks of the Brodribb River, *Cissus Australasica*, was too late. Across the Pacific the American botanist, Asa Gray, had just beaten him in the naming game

with the name *Cissus hypoglauca*. In his 'Plants Indigenous to the Colony of Victoria' Mueller (1862) used Gray's name but later, in his 'Key to the System of Victorian Plants', Mueller (1888) tried to influence the naming of the native grape by calling it *Vitis hypoglauca*. However, Gray's name has endured.

Mueller was more successful with his two other names. The first recorded Australian species of *Celastrus* still bears Mueller's name. His specimens in Victoria's National Herbarium, three of which are now the type specimens for *Celastrus australis* Harvey & F. Muell., came from the Snowy and Buchan rivers and a rocky mountain near the Murrindal River, a tributary of the Snowy.

Mueller suffered some indecision about his third new name, *Cocculus Harveyanus*. On the labels of the herbarium specimens, which he collected from the mouth of the Snowy River, the Brodribb River, and Cabbage-tree Creek in March 1854 and January 1855, Mueller sometimes wrote *Cocculus Harveyanus* and sometimes *Sarcopetalum Harveyanum*. Mueller took a specimen to grow in the Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, which flowered in November 1859. Later Mueller (1862) officially described and named the vine *Sarcopetalum Harveyanum* in honour of his esteemed and learned friend, Professor William Harvey of Trinity College, Dublin, who visited Victoria in the spring and summer of 1854 and who, jointly with Mueller (1855a), named *Celastrus Australis*. Mueller (1862) considered these two plants noteworthy as examples of the most southerly 'commencement of the tropical jungle flora, which in eastern Australia bears so much resemblance to that of India' (p27).

Climbing plants are crucial elements in the ecology and physiognomy of the warm temperate rainforests of East Gippsland. Thick festoons of vines affect the humidity, wind speed, and sunlight entering these rainforests and give them their jungle appearance. A small patch of 'jungle' may include over a dozen species

of climbing plants, most of which are rarely found in Victoria outside East Gippsland. These climbers emphasize the uniqueness in Victoria of this rainforest vegetation.

As Mueller noted, many plant families as well as genera reach their most southern latitude here and are not found elsewhere in Victoria. Each of the three vines, *Cissus hypoglauca* A. Gray (jungle grape), *Sarcopetalum harveyanum* F. Muell. (pearl vine), and *Celastrus australis* Harvey & F. Muell. (staff climber), is the only Victorian member, not just of its genus, but of its family - the Vitaceae, Menispermaceae, and Celastraceae respectively. Four other vines which Mueller collected from East Gippsland jungles and which Robert Brown had named early in the nineteenth century - *Smilax australis* R. Br. (Austral Sarsaparilla or Lawyer-vine), *Ripogonum album* R. Br. (White Supplejack), *Eustrephus latifolius* R. Br. (Wombat Berry or Orange Vine), and *Geitonoplesium cymosum* (R. Br.) Cunn. (Scrambling Lily or Shepherd's Joy) - were once considered Victoria's only climbing lilies. These four plants were recently taken out of the Liliaceae and now constitute the only Victorian members of the family Smilacaceae (Ross 1993).

Useful plants

Mueller was always on the lookout for new useful plants. East Gippsland was indeed a garden of Eden. As well as the Cabbage Tree Palm, he noted and gathered seeds of a kind of elder tree, a raspberry, and a species of *Smilax*, which he hoped would be medicinally allied to the true American Sarsaparilla (Mueller to Foster, 10 March 1854). Mueller (1855a) hoped that the new elder tree, which he found on shady moist banks of the Snowy, Brodribb, and Cabbage-tree rivers, would be as useful as the common elder, whose habit it aped. In his paper to Victoria's Philosophical Society, Mueller (1855a) described and named the new elder tree *Sambucus xanthocarpa*. It has since been renamed *S. australasica* (Lindley) Fritsch.

Mueller (1855b) also had high hopes for a new species of *Solanum*:

Here, on the coast, and in various other parts of Gipps' Land, I observed a *Solanum*, called by the aborigines Gungang [Gunyang], which promises to become an additional fruit-shrub of our gardens. I have not yet obtained the perfect ripe fruit, which is said to be of excellent taste, and of which the natives are passionately fond. In the summer and autumn of 1855 Mueller (1855c) found the tasty-fruited Gunyang growing quite widely - on sandy ridges round Lake Wellington, along the coast towards the mouth of the Snowy River, on grassy hills of the Tambo and Nicholson rivers, near the Buehan River, and on the banks of the La Trobe River. Mueller (1855e) gave it its current name *Solanum vescum* F. Muell.

By Lake King in February 1855 Mueller (1855d) also observed,

amongst other rare and unknown plants, some fine trees of *Acronychia*, a genus known from Eastern Australia and New Caledonia, remarkable for its splendid wood and the aromatic property by which the species are pervaded.

A member of the Rutaceae, *Acronychia oblongifolia* (Cunn. ex Hook.) Endl. ex Heynh., has the common name Yellow-wood. Its yellow, hard, straight-grained, dense timber is suitable for tool handles and mallets, veneers and cabinet work as well as carving.

From Eden, 1860

In 1860 Mueller realized his ambition of half a decade earlier and approached the far eastern tip of Victoria from New South Wales before the summer months. He sailed from Melbourne to Twofold Bay on the service newly established for the exodus of goldminers from Melbourne en route to the Snowy Mountains diggings (Mueller to Hooker, 17 September 1860). In one of his characteristically long sentences Mueller (1861a) in his Annual Report related that:

During the month of September I was

engaged in elucidating the vegetation along the south-eastern frontiers of the colony, crossing the country from Twofold Bay to the Genoa, along which river I travelled to the coast, deviating to Cape Howe and to the adjoining freshwater lake, and ascended again the Genoa River to near its sources, examining the adjacent elevated country and the Nungatta mountains on my way, where I was rewarded with the discovery of a new Warratah [sic] (*Telopea oreades*), which luxuriates at an elevation of 4000 feet, and where also a very remarkable and beautiful tree, hitherto unknown (*Elaeocarpus holopetalus*), was added to our collection.

In a letter to Sir William Hooker at Kew and later in his Annual Report, Mueller was pleased to record his discovery of two species of *Dendrobium* orchids so far south. On frosty Genoa Peak and other rocky outcrops in the vicinity of the lower Genoa River he noted patches of *D. speciosum* and another species which he referred to as *D. Milligani* (Mueller to Hooker, 17 September 1860; Mueller 1861a).

In 1860 there were six pastoral runs along the valley of the Genoa River and its source streams - Bondi, Nungatta, Wongrabell/Wangarabell, Merrimingo/Maramingo, Genoa and Mallacoota (Wakefield 1969a). However, this was the first botanical exploration (for anything other than pasture) of this remote part of the colony.

Although Mueller collected in the vicinity of Cape Howe, Mallacoota, Genoa Peak, and the Genoa River, he discovered two of East Gippsland's botanical gems, the Gippsland Waratah and the Black Oliveberry, outside East Gippsland - in the Nungatta mountains on the NSW side of the yet-to-be-determined border. When he first saw the Waratah, Mueller thought that it was the Tasmanian species, *Telopea truncata* R. Br.: It was early in the season and he had not yet seen good flowers (Mueller to Hooker, 25 October 1860). Back in Melbourne,

Mueller (1861b) recognised it as a new species and named it after Milton's nymphs of the mountains, the Oreads.

On the herbarium label of the specimen which he collected on that trip and which is now the type specimen of *Telopea oreades* F. Muell., Mueller recorded that it was found on Nungatta Creek. Mueller is not the only name on that label. The name of the lessee of Nungatta Station, Weatherhead, is also recorded. Perhaps they discovered it together. However it is more likely that, as was the case for the Victorian patch of Cabbage Tree Palms, botanical science was aided by pastoral knowledge. Weatherhead probably told or showed Mueller where the beautiful Waratah grew on his run. The Gippsland Waratah and Black Oliveberry still bear the names Mueller (1861b) gave them - *Telopea oreades* and *Elaeocarpus holopetalus* - and were subsequently found in Victoria. Other plants which Mueller collected across the border in 1860 and included in his 'Key to the System of Victorian Plants', have not subsequently been found in Victoria (Wakefield 1952).

By 1860 Victoria's first government botanist, Dr Ferdinand Mueller, had completed a substantial perustration of the flora of East Gippsland. He had recorded for the first time in Victoria many plants already known from elsewhere and had named many plants new to science.

Towards conservation

Mueller's interest in the flora of East Gippsland continued long after his treks in the region. As a founding member of the young FNCV, Baron von Mueller suggested the permanent reservation of areas of the Cabbage Tree Palm and the Waratah (Mueller to Barnard, 10 August 1887, and 1 September 1887). He called the Waratah country of East Gippsland the 'Australian Switzerland', a term which one of his collectors, the landscape photographer Charles Walter, had used in the *Illustrated Australian News* in 1871, after visiting the Genoa Valley and the

newly named Mount Ellery (Gillbank 1992b).

Mueller also proposed the extensive FNCV expedition in East Gippsland in January 1889, and helped to identify plants which Professor Baldwin Spencer and four other Club members brought back (Spencer and French 1889). Their botanical enthusiasm for Victoria's isolated patch of palms on the Cabbage-tree Creek matched the Baron's. With Mueller's support, the FNCV successfully sought

to reserve from selection a strip of country along the banks of the Cabbage-tree Creek, County of Croajingolong. This proposed reservation which should extend for about two chains on each side of the creek from the 9 mile tree to the 16th would contain the best groups of the Cabbage Palms and is the only spot in Victoria where this beautiful palm is to be seen in its natural state (Barnard to Secretary for Lands, 12 February 1889).

In March 1889, a reservation of 8,500 acres was gazetted (Secretary for Lands to Barnard, 28 March 1889). The wooden sign now at the start of the walking track in the reserve commemorates Spencer but not the FNCV.

Mueller was pleased with the reservation of the area of Cabbage Tree Palms, but was concerned that Victoria's beautiful Waratah was not protected in any reserve. As a member of the FNCV Committee for the preservation of the indigenous vegetation, Mueller repeated his earlier plea for the permanent reservation of some Waratah country, and urged that the Club apply for 'withdrawing from selection the best of the *Waratah Vallies* in Eastern Gippsland', which Professor Spencer and his companions would be able to describe, 'so that the District Surveyors might become instructed to keep these glorious spots intact' (Mueller to Barnard, 3 May 1890).

A century after the FNCV members had seen Waratahs on Mt Ellery and near Goonmirk Rocks, their descendent plants

were protected within the incredibly indented boundary of the Errinundra National Park. The Baron would be relieved that some Waratah country in areas he sometimes referred to as 'Australian Switzerland' has eventually been reserved in a National Park.

Mueller and the FNCV deserve our thanks for surveying the vegetation and for arguing for its preservation. Sometimes it takes a long time for a vision to be realized.

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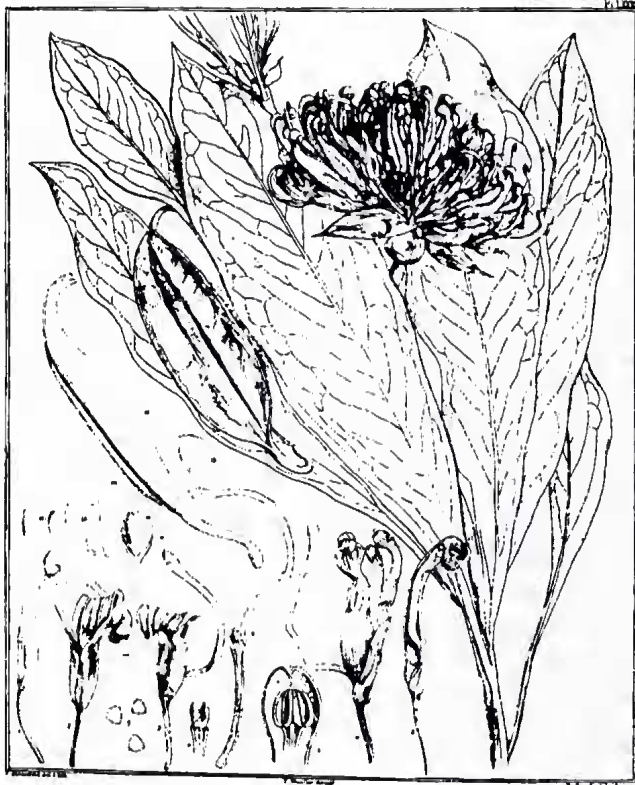
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Telopea oreades FM

The Gippsland Waratah *Telopea oreades*. From A.J. Ewart (1910, Melbourne). 'Plants Indigenous to Victoria' Vol. II Plate LXXIII.